

From Production to Personalisation

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## A reflection of industry, design and people

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Over two centuries, the relationship between industry, design and people, as consumers, has experienced significant changes which have transformed and continue to transform our relationship with the physical and human habitat which surrounds us and of which we form part. Today, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we see in perspective the dynamics of the generation of those changes which have taken us from the Age of Production to that of the present day which is a phase of development – the Age of Personalisation.

### Industry in the Age of Production

The industrialization of production was introduced at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with overwhelming success. Industrial logic initially enabled the objects and uses that were representative of the socio-cultural model prior to industrialization to be taken and reproduced in the industrial warehouse in less time, greater quantities and at a price accessible to a greater number of people. First textiles, then everyday objects, it finally expanded to all areas of production – what was craft production became industrial production. In a short period of time, industrialisation transformed all areas of everyday life, generating population flows towards the new environments moulded by industrialisation: the factories and the cities.

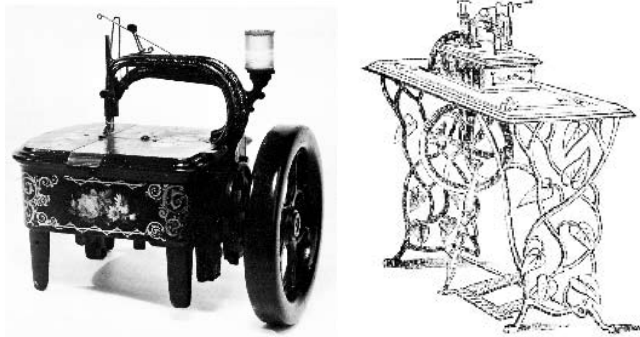
But what was initially an exercise in substitution of knowledge and craft techniques for the production of goods, with the introduction of advanced technology, became the creation of new instruments for the distribution and expansion of industrial society beyond national boundaries. Transport, especially trains and the railway system, a new merchant fleet and river navigation allowed goods to be transported beyond national boundaries and the importation of basic raw materials for the growth and development of a new model of socio-economic organization: *industrial society*.

But the process of profound transformation of daily reality was not all a bed of roses. Economic success was unable to hide the lack of planning in the cities,

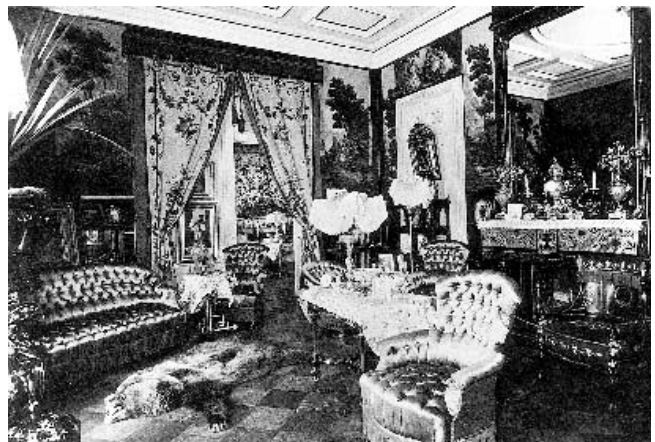
which were forced to accept large populations from the countryside, without having the necessary physical infrastructures and road networks to sustain such rapid growth in the urban life and organization.

Criticism was quick to arrive and the need for reform became urgent in order to guarantee the sustainability and growth of the industrial model. Even the goods themselves were strongly criticized by different social and cultural bodies of the agitated 19th century. The lack of operative idealism of the products, that is, the aptitude for fulfilling a function of use such as quality from an aesthetic point of view, was evident. Commercial effec-

place in the industrial organisation. They considered everything, from urban planning to building, interior design to furniture and working instruments, through clothing, transport, communication and all the areas which involved the use of industrially produced goods and services. The critics focussed on three key aspects of the production of that time (among the many technical, sociological and ideological ones that existed): the lack of adaptation of production to new situation of use, the disinterest of the cultural and aesthetic patrons in every region and the absence of an aesthetic that was a true expression of industrial civilization.



Singer "Family" and "New Family", sewing machines, 1858.



American room, 1894.

tiveness began to prove insufficient for the legitimization of goods that were so inappropriate, in terms of image, to an industrial culture that was presented to the world as a model to be imitated.

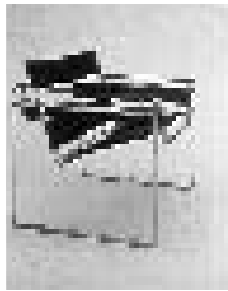
From the mid-19th century, architects, artists and craftsmen, the greatly marginalised sector of industrial society, substituted by the profession of the moment, engineering, began their long journey in search of a

If the proposals and activities of the period from 1840 to the beginning of the 20th century made a partial contribution to improving quality (which constitutes an exceptionally beautiful set of baggage in terms of the production of the period), it was not until the second decade of the century that a method was available for industrial creation and production, which combined the necessary conditions to be able to overcome the problems mentioned above, and articulated it in a new and

genuinely original kind of production. Under the name 'Modern Movement', a new discourse was to emerge focussing on the *value of use*, which would overcome the dichotomies of beauty and use, art and industry, looking at industrial production in its entirety as a field of action and professionalism ("from the spoon to the city"). This group, made up of well-known architects, artists, craftsmen and teachers, of different nationalities but mainly from Central Europe, were united by a spirit and a vocation of shared innovation and social commitment, and developed educational experiences, exhibitions, books, prototypes and products which spread a set of ideas and models that gradually became clear references of a new aesthetic for goods: *the machine aesthetic*.



*Bauhaus School*, Dessau, Walter Gropius, 1924.



*Wasili armchair*, Marcel Breuer, 1926.

Despite the great contribution of the Modern Movement (a phenomenon which also included literature, art and other cultural manifestations of the time), the insertion into industry of these new architects and designers was very slow. European industry, concerned to find solutions for the difficulties of an industrial production geared towards satisfying the basic needs of the population for life in the new industrial cities (by then new technology had introduced improvements in the urban infrastructure such as electricity, increasing the media pressure in the cities, and new products such as the automobile), did not listen to the voices of the Modern Movement which,

thanks to its contacts and influences on the other side of the Atlantic expanded its ideology beyond European boundaries. The 1932 exhibition on the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) called "The International Style" contained work from the Movement and assigned the term *International* to the proposals and products of the group. In other words, it was a form of creation that expressed the intention to overcome the limitations (at least as they were seen at the time) of the models and products of national cultures. The machine aesthetic saw itself as the form of creating goods which established it as a transnational reference point and the most sophisticated symbol for representing the cultural development of industrial society.

Industry meanwhile, concentrating on the complex problem of producing sufficient goods to satisfy the growing needs of an ever-increasing industrial society which was expanding across the whole planet, was faced with a new situation: competition.

At the end of the 1920s, North American industry was one of the reference points for the knowledge and development of mass production techniques. Research into the organisation of factory production led the Ford automobile company to adopt the *production line* concept which, together with the standardisation of components, enabled an increase in the volume of production of the Model "T" (1908), reducing production time and manufacturing costs and sales costs went down to more than half in 1927. The automobile, flagship product of industrial culture and symbol of individual liberty that was only previously available to a wealthy minority, came attractively close to the ownership possibilities of a new majority.

Everything seemed to function according to an industrial logic which was centred on production engineering and science: a single model, stylistically durable, could satisfy the desire for liberty of the new consumer. But

the introduction of a series of new automobiles created by General Motors, which were more compact and had a more careful and refined design captured the attention of the public, despite its significantly higher price, leaving the Model "T" Ford in second place among the desires of the population. The industrial logic of mass production was no longer enough to gain public favour. The consumers, until then considered as passive receivers of industrial products, began to react to new stimuli. At the beginning of the 1930s American industry realized that there was an urgent need to attend to new consumer needs. The industrial era based on the production of goods which were necessary in industrial society, would make way for a new direction for production, now based on the interests of the consumers and on differentiation with the competitors.

*lined design* was the result of the creation and application of an exterior form that enveloped all possible mechanisms. The "aerodynamic" form, organic and biomorphous in origin, which arose from the rush of studies into aerodynamics, had an air of sophistication about it that excited the consumer of the time. The symbolic strength of its image had a magnetic effect on the public and motivated industry to apply it to all kinds of products, from refrigerators to pencil sharpeners. The *aesthetic product*, to paraphrase a slogan of that time, resulted in an upward turn for the sales curves.

The second post war period brought with it a displacement of the main interests of industry. It changed from concentrating on production to having an interest in consumption, and more specifically, in the consumer – in their interests and desires. It was no longer a matter of



Redesign of commercial scales, Raymond Loewy, 1929.



Pencil sharpener, Raymond Loewy, 1934.



Cadillac Eldorado, designed by Harley Earl, General Motors, 1955.

## 2. The Age of Communication

Throughout the 1930s, American industry included artists and commercial illustrators in the areas of product creation as assessors of good taste. Most had been trained in the fields of advertising graphics and fine art. In that way, the product became "stylized", its form acquired a very different meaning from that of the machine aesthetic, based principally on a formal language which expressed the logic of the *mechanical assembly of its parts*. What became known as *stream-*

the price-quality relationship of the goods, but that the product should interest and *motivate* the consumer to own it. This fact led to the introduction of a new factor: psychological research into consumer buying habits. The results were surprising – people were motivated to make purchases through needs such as emotional security, the feeling of doing something creative, satisfying their egos, the feelings of power, a sense of ownership, immortality, etc. Packard, 1957).

It is difficult to imagine that the product could satisfy such complex needs. But the concern to ensure that these needs, which were very different from the basic necessities of the production age, were satisfied by the ownership of a product was the key factor for industrial success. The communication industry would take on an especially important role in the process of consumption which thanks to *advertising campaigns* – the visual (and audiovisual) rhetoric and the introduction of the star medium of communication at the time, the television – managed to give new sense to the products. From that time on, in addition to offering a basic service, *all products were messages*.

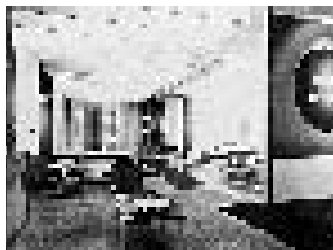
In the 1950s, consumers expressed their social standing through the possession and social display of products. Having the latest versions of each model enabled the

Design, both in production and communication, returned as an essential instrument for the articulation of the complex content of the advertising message, and also to give specific, visible and attractive shape to the interesting features of the product. From automobiles to electrical goods, from furniture to clothing, the home, the office, shopping centres and all public and private areas all products (and services) directed their content and communication towards satisfying the reasons for buying them. The American industrial society of that era constructed a new socio-economic model of production – *the consumer society*.

The industrial model, organised within the large factories, heavy industry in which all production was concentrated in the warehouses or industrial complexes, geared towards the mass production of goods for mass



First Prize in *Organic Furniture* competition, Charles Eames-Eero Saarinen, MoMA, New York, 1940.



*Good Design* exhibition, MoMA, 1954.



Interior of the Knoll Inc. Director's office, 1956.

owner to establish their position on the social scale and celebrate their subscription to a new lifestyle (the American way of life), which at that time was projected to the world through the television, cinema and all other mass media. American society expanded internationally and its production was synonymous with progress, well-being, wealth, sophistication and individual liberty. The goods, their image and their ownership became the symbol of a social, productive and economic model.

consumption, now centralised the creation of products on a consumer market which grew as the model became internationalised. The aesthetic of *mass culture* with its *status products* and its lively atmosphere was created and diffused in the United States. Young people, the new group identified by the marketers, were the stars and they projected the popular American aesthetic through the mass media. It was the beginning of pop culture and design – a use-and-throw-away model, with low

costs, plastics and bulbous forms, decorative, with mass appeal, which incorporated the terms and reasons of the mass media of the moment.

Parallel to this, the design of the International Style continued to develop throughout the 1950s thanks to the efforts of Europeans who had emigrated to America and some American architects and designers who adopted their ideas and their methods. Through the *Good Design* platform, the MoMA promoted cultural and educational activities which established *design quality* as their point of reference. The *organic form* – an evolution of the machine aesthetic which concentrated on the form of the message associated with goods expressing the universal, stable values of industrial culture, established itself as an independent, timeless language, in contrast to the short-lived products of pop culture. This design

Meanwhile, the socio-economic model of American consumption was introduced into Europe together with its the strength of its symbols. The European designers were aware that the *machine aesthetic* and the *ideology of the Modern Movement*, the European point of reference for design, had lost interest and efficiency and were no longer representative of the collective imagination of the time. Now the driving force of reality was in television, cinema and magazines, and the products which inspired the *mass media aesthetic*. In this context *European Pop design* made a surprisingly large contribution to furniture and objects that would express a young, rebel culture, open and imaginative, which challenged all previous knowledge both in terms of forms and concepts. New ways of sitting, new materials and integrated functions of use are some of the key elements in this colourful, hypnotic, voluptuous, innovative time.



Joe's Sofa by D'urbino, de Pas and Lomazzi, ed. Zanotta, 1967.



Up, armchair and chair series, Gaetano Pesce, ed. C&B Italia, 1968.

model (which was also developed in post-war Europe with national variations) included architecture, interior design and graphic design, and was adopted by American multinationals in order to project a *stable and modern corporate image*, in the sense of the Modern Movement. The modern aesthetic and the pop aesthetic clearly differentiated two opposite poles of meaning: classical design and popular design.

But in the mid 1960s a new growth crisis opened up a new wall of criticism by the political movements, who expressed their opposition to a model of living centred on the consumption of goods and ephemeral values. This dissidence would continue to increase in intensity, until groups of designers and architects began to protest in favour of alternative design which promoted new values. The political crisis of May '68 in Paris was to be the first test that American consumerist design would have to overcome. A series of groups which emerged under the name *Anti-Design*, especially in Italy, radically criticised the American consumerist design and asserted the need to stop designing for industry. Their proposals translated into exhibitions that had an apocalyptic air about them and reflected on the homogenization of the world, the consumer culture the mass media and the manipulation of consumers and the possible ecological consequences of unlimited consumption, without offering any design prototypes or proposals. Their criticism turned designers against the productive system of which they had formed part.

The economic crisis deepened further with the petrol crisis in 1973, and it was not until well into the 1970s that a new model for consumer society marked the beginning of a period of recovery and change for product design. From that time on, the American monopoly of goods design gave way to a new kind of design conceived with cultural values from other areas of the world, in particular Europe and especially Italy. The design of the cultural mould for consumers would introduce new formal and communicative product variants. The product would also be conceived as a message, however it no longer represented the American consumer ideal but a different consumer culture which was considered to be transnational and globally reaching. Consumer society and the model for living that goods represented would become enriched by the incorporation of different cultural variants. These would now promote differentiation not of society but of the *individual consumer*, seeking the satisfaction of per-

represented by American design, should be substituted by consumer culture. Here there emerges a new form of socio-economic organization – *Postmodern Culture*.

The new consumer culture, which focussed on product differentiation as a means of consumer differentiation, was also to find its inspiration in the mass media but not exclusively: the references would broaden out to the histories of design, art and architecture, and everything that forms part of productive imagination and social consumption, susceptible to producing something new. Design would integrate into the product the signs of other times and cultural classes enabling the consumer to project a message of different *appearance* through possession of the goods. The product would become a *sign value*. The buzzword at that time was “image” – product image, brand image, personal image, etc.



*Self-management, Yes; Mass Art and Culture, No*, Milan Triennial, 1967.



*New New York, Superstudio*, 1967.

But this change would not have been possible without the corresponding changes in industry, organisation and technology of industrial production. If American design took place in great industrial warehouses, according to the logic of mass production, the *New Design* (the label that would distinguish the design from the late 1970s to the late 1980s) was carried out in small studios with computerized production and control. It was assembled in specialist workshops, conceived in

sonal interests of differentiation. It would no longer be just a question of social status, but also of personal style.

Product design would extend the range of styles to infinity through the incorporation of superficial differentiating signs in the goods, which would foster in the consumer, through ownership, the chance of *being* different by *appearing* to be different. Consumer ideology, previously

small series and created by a designer whose profile was more like that of an artist – a personality as important and media-seeking as his designs. *New technological craftsmanship* and the designer-maker (it was no longer necessary to be involved in big industry to do something different) also distinguish this new way of designing.

Design was launched along this path to make all products *communicatively different*. The big brands of the design industry (from furniture to motor cars, electrical household goods, fashion and daily settings) would make production more *semantic*, generating a landscape loaded with symbolic variations. Rapidly, consumers gave in to the game of social simulation, made possible by the possession of products-image, adopting the styles and the *air of distinction* necessary for their social enjoyment. The huge variety of styles generated an almost eclectic atmosphere, in terms of style, and the social scene, both in private and in public, constituted the setting and the opportunity for consumers, eager to be noticed, to express a personality that changed as quickly as the fashions.

Soon the landscape of everyday life would become fictional, superficial and banal, thanks to the *effectist* proliferation of differences. At the end of the decade, semantic contamination produced the effect of disinterest among a public who had begun to show a need for products which fitted their interests, not to make them seem different but to *really feel it*. The need for sensory hygiene led to the appearance of *minimalism* (a flagship style of the period which had a strong influence on interiors, clothes and objects) and the search for more genuine, less *theatrical* products that were, in the end, closer to the interest of a consumer who was tired of appearances.

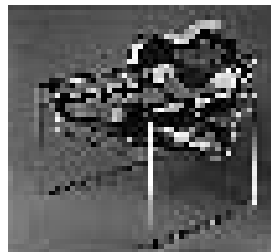
### 3. The Age of Personalisation

The new phase of development of consumer culture, in the process of world expansion through globalisation, started in the 1990s and has continued evolving up to the present day, taking as its focus of interest for industry and design the satisfaction of new needs of people both as consumers and experienced individuals.

If during the 1980s consumers gave in passively to the products-image designed by the big names, in the 1990s

they would call for products which allowed them to develop their own identities, explore their own tastes, “discover themselves” in order to express their personalities. Consumers, aware of the opportunity to choose from among an enormous range of possibilities, no longer waited to be told what to buy but assumed a more active role in the shaping of their own personal universe. Personal image was no longer in the hands of ownership and exhibition of a brand, but the result of making individual decisions within the multiple range of consumer options, which was also but not exclusively made possible by the brands.

The age of appearances, ostentation and superficiality began to decline along with the awareness and need to live experiences which were more in line with new inter-



Wasili II, redesign by  
Alessandro Mendini,  
1976.



Salt cellar,  
Charles Jencks-  
Alessi, 1983.



Carlton (Memphis)  
Ettore Sottsass  
bookstore, 1981.

est in real personal welfare. *Looking different* continued to be important but it was sought by different, non-superficial means, which stimulated a *demonstrable physical and sensory experience*. One element to illustrate this period can be found in the development of new materials which enabled a product-consumer dialogue which was different both in visual contact and in the physical feel of the product in use: fashion and accessories are a classic case (also daily objects and architecture). The term *New Sensuality* therefore arose.



The appearance of simplicity has become a key to the product aesthetic of the period. In the expression “*back to basics*”, design has a label adopted by the international critics for the world presentation of the *Droog Design* group, pioneer in the communication of new ideas of material production, and enables the entrance of a new generation of international designers interested in including in the industrial product questions such as new and used, the value of use and emotional value, traditional and new materials, nature as a creative factor, the ephemeral and the lasting, the personalization of the industrial series, the decontextualisation of knowledge and the contextualisation of the unknown, the integration of new functions, the global and the local, etc. Interpretation and experimentation have become essential in the design of new products which more than responding to the specific needs displayed by the consumer *propose new experiences* for traditional and new uses. The exploration of traditional limits in disciplines such as architecture, industrial and interior design, graphic and

multimedia design and their interaction with art and the media is defined as new territory for shared experimentation. There therefore emerges a new design discourse centred on the product (although not exhaustively) which *dialogues* with experienced consumers, appealing to their creativeness, intelligence and irony in both ownership and use.

Another key factor of the age of personalisation is the introduction of new information technology and communication in everyday life. With the introduction of computing at the end of the 1970s and its progressive application in all fields of work, society acquired the opportunity to manipulate and control the different stages of the production process. Later, with the integration of telecommunications, the information-telecommunication relationship opened up new possibilities for interaction between consumers, industry and design. Consumers (like industry and those who have basic technology available to them) now have the opportunity of finding



Swatch, *Signs* line; *Information Landscape* line and *The Artists* line, model *Jim Avignon*, 1996.

out what they want to know and deciding what their consumer options are.

Progressively, information has become essential capital when planning any activity, both for industry and consumers. The parallel introduction of the mobile phone (mobility technology) favoured the acceleration and growth in people mobility throughout the planet and a growing interaction within and with the communication networks for carrying out any activity: work, shopping, leisure and countless other activities that are increasingly managed by those systems. In a way that they have never had before, industry and consumers now have the possibility of exchanging data about their interests and

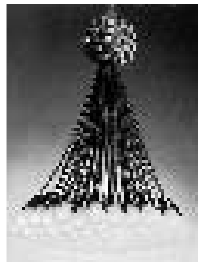
localization of the global and the globalisation of the local. This tension is profoundly and rapidly transforming the characteristics of the composition, beliefs and needs of the population, particularly in the cities. The demand for fluency and efficiency of displacements also includes the need for emotional stability in exchanges in order to guarantee acceptable minimum levels of integrating what is different. All rapid changes and a growing tolerance to differences has favoured public expression of behaviours which were previously restricted to private spheres (religion, sexuality, etc.) The public urban space is a fertile territory for the comprehension and interpretation of the personalisation of consumption and cultural use of the city.



Polyurethane vase with imperfections, H. Jongerius, 1996.



Tulip planter, A. Møller, 1995.



Standard lamp, R. Graumans, 1993.

The mass media has an essential leading role in the construction of a new imagination for this age, in the dynamic from global to local and vice versa. The proliferation of new media - specialist and general, graphic and audiovisual, open access and restricted, independent or integrated, in public and private spheres, and the possibility of planning reception and interaction "à la carte", together with Internet and web pages, are some of the ways in which the growing personalisation in the media field is manifesting

the chances of satisfying them. The culture of globalised consumption has the techno-cultural platform offered by information technology and communication which is essential for the new form of social organisation: the *information society*.

Information society together with globalisation and mobile technology has generated a world population *in transit* with specific needs, which have direct repercussions on the most stable population nuclei. The personalization of consumption poses two questions which are difficult to balance but urgently need channelling: the

itself. The increase in media pressure on the population in public and private space and time demands a new reading and interpretation of its effects in the framework of a consumer culture.

The question of sustainability, of central concern to the consumer in the development of consumer culture, is making industry change rapidly. The production processes and industrial organization are evolving with the aim of achieving not only the reuse of all that is consumed. Research into alternative energies to petroleum is advancing while energy-generating systems with low

environmental output are increasingly being introduced into traditional systems. The concern is not only to use less but also to use it better, to reuse and generate new sources of energy in the process.

Consumer consciousness and the importance of this in creating products and services is opening up new possibilities for design which combines individual satisfaction with the ethics of the act of consumption. A series of ideas might express, in a conceptual way, the semantic niche of consumer interest today: novelty, utility, real experimentation and personal expression; environmental sustainability and social equality; interest in what is global and respect for what is local; sensitivity to mem-

ory; interaction and participation; individuality and sense of community; liberty and security; efficiency; sensuality, adaptation over time...

The age of personalisation is not without conflicts, contradictions and paradoxes, but it is a reality in the development phase. From the age of production to today, consumers have evolved from being passive receivers of industry and design thought up for them, to the present situation of growing levels of interaction with industry and society through design and ownership. It is also an open and malleable scene for consumers who have a more specific opportunity to express their interests through consumption and use.

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